

Ripples: The Gospel Spreads in the Book of Acts

Overview Themes of the Book of Acts, Part Four: The Kingdom Advances (1:6-8)

February 23, 2025

Prayer

A long time ago a seminary professor recommended that we study the Book of Romans to learn the content of the gospel, the Book John for the heart of the gospel and the Book of Acts for the story of the gospel.

This is one reason I am so eager to be in the Book of Acts with you so that we might share this amazing story together.

So far we've seen how The Lord Acts, The Word Spreads, The Church Thrives and The Believers Grow. Today we will clearly see why this series is called Ripples as we look at how The Kingdom Advances.

The author, Luke, tells us that the resurrected Jesus spent 40 days giving the Apostles many convincing proofs that He was alive as He spoke to them about the Kingdom of God. Our text this morning is Luke's account of their final conversation before Jesus ascended. Acts 1:6-8.

⁶ So when they met together, they asked him, "Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?"

⁷ He said to them: "It is not for you to know the times or dates the Father has set by his own authority. ⁸ But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

There is so much here. Let's just walk through it and see what we can discover. First we will consider what they understood about these words. Then we will consider how these words relate to us today.

For centuries the Jewish people were told that God would bring His kingdom to earth and place one of King David's descendants on the throne. Their history, need and longing caused many to believe that God's kingdom would be a political and geographical reality within which they would live and find blessing. I think this was the disciples' perspective and I say that because of the words they used in their question.

"Lord, are you at this time going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" The verb *restore* shows they expected a political and territorial kingdom. They expected God to restore what once was. The noun *Israel* shows that they expected a national kingdom, one that was focused primarily on a specific people group. The adverbial clause, *at this time* indicates they expected this kingdom would come quickly. They were not thinking of a gradual transition.

When you look at what the prophets foretold and Jesus taught about God's kingdom, we find three key points that we want to keep in mind.

Scripture teaches that **God's kingdom is spiritual in its character, rather than territorial**. Jesus replied to their question by saying God's kingdom is not about when or where; it is about how!

The Holy Spirit defines the kingdom's nature and the Holy Spirit empowers how it spreads. The power they were about to receive is different than the power they had hoped to receive. Rather than receive political power to rule, they will receive a spiritual power to witness.

John Stott describes God's kingdom with these beautiful words. "The kingdom of God is his rule set up in the lives of his people by the Holy Spirit. It is spread by witness, not by soldiers, through a gospel of peace, not a declaration of war, and by the work of the Spirit, not by force of arms, political intrigue or revolutionary violence."

God's kingdom is different from the world's kingdoms and its presence today impacts this world in challenging ways. A simple reading of the Sermon on the Mount shows that God's kingdom will engage and conflict with the world as what God values collides with what the world values.

The early church was known for saying "Jesus is Lord." Everyone else was expected to say "Caesar is lord," but Christians could not do that. The conviction that Jesus is Lord, and the actions that flowed out of that conviction, caused quite a stir in the kingdom of Rome, even as it does in any kingdom present today.

So, God's kingdom is spiritual in its character, rather than territorial. It is also **international in its membership**. It is not just found in Jerusalem or Judea or neighboring Samaria, but also to the furthest reaches of the world.

Jesus knocks down every dividing wall and rules over a kingdom that is unified by His Spirit. It is an international community made up of people from every nation, tribe, people group and language (Rev 7:9).

God's kingdom is spiritual in character, international in membership and **gradual in its expansion**. To their question, "Is this the time you will restore the kingdom to Israel?", Jesus replied, "You do not need to know the hour when the Father's plans will be completed. Those details are taken care of. You just need to be faithful with the task you have been given (Luke 19:11ff).

I wonder if the words of Deuteronomy 29:29 came to their minds, "The Lord our God has secrets known to no one. We are not accountable for them, but we and our children are accountable forever for all that he has revealed to us."

Knowing the times and dates the Father has set was not for them to know. What they could know is that they would receive power to be His witnesses in ever-widening circles—ripples that begin in Jerusalem and expand out to cover the entire world.

Have you ever considered what happens when a rock creates ripples in a pond? Jesus was a major influencer in His day. After three years of public ministry, He had many people talking and many who carried strong positive and strong negative opinions about Him.

His rapid trial and execution caused enough of a stir, but what really made the splash was the fast-moving news of His resurrection. With this in mind, watch this video, keeping your eye on the center of the impact zone and watch what happens to the water.

[Slow-motion video of large rock thrown into a pond]

The ripple caused by our Lord's resurrection is a Holy-Spirit empowered tsunami that travels the entire pond with unstoppable force. But there is something else that happens here that gives us more to consider. Let's look at this again, only this time focus your attention to the area above the impact zone.

[Video again.]

Notice how the rock dislodges smaller droplets that are launched beyond the primary wave and create their own rippled before the wave even arrives. The eighth chapter of Acts shows how—like a great stone thrown into a pond—a persecution scattered the believers out of Jerusalem and then details how the gospel spread out to Judea, Samaria and Ethiopia.

This rippling advance of God's kingdom becomes a table of contents for the remainder of this book. The kingdom of God establishes a strong foothold in Jerusalem (1-7), then spreads to Judea and Samaria (ch 8) and then to the surrounding nations (9-28).

We've taken some time to consider how the original audience thought about these words. That's good to do, but we need to acknowledge that these words given to the original apostles were also intended for us.ⁱ So, let's look again at how these words may apply to our lives and context.

Jesus said, we will receive something. To receive is to gain possession of an item that was once not in your possession. It is a gift that comes from outside of us. This is not something *we initiate* by taking. This is something *Jesus initiates* by giving.

John records how the resurrected Jesus breathed on His disciples and said, "Receive the Holy Spirit." "As the Father has sent me, so I am sending you." This is a marvelous passage to meditate on. How was Jesus sent? How are we sent? How does His example impact our practice? What role does the Spirit play in all this?

Think this out. Think this in. Think this up. Think on these things and the Spirit will give you insight (Jn 16:13).

So, Jesus tells His disciples that they will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on them. This is language pointing back to the prophets.

The prophets said that when you see the Holy Spirit poured out on people without regard for their age, gender or social standing, then you will know that God's kingdom has begun. This event would mark the start of a new day when everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.

This new day is why Paul pleaded with the Corinthians, "I urge you not to receive God's grace in vain....for now is the time of God's favor. Now is the day of salvation" (2 Cor 6:1-2). The old has gone; the new has come!

Our Lord's sinless life, sacrificial death, victorious resurrection and glorious ascension brought a massive change into our world and into our lives. Those who embrace this gift by faith receive new life in Christ. They are saved out of death and brought into life. Rescued out of the kingdom of darkness and brought into the kingdom of light. This is a most amazing blessing.

Scripture teaches that we are blessed to be a blessing. In other words, what God gives us He means for us to share with others, and that includes the good news of God's kingdom come in Christ. The only way we can share this gift with others is if we possess it.

If we don't possess God's kingdom, we can't share it. We could still talk about it, but we can't share the experience of it with someone else unless we possess it ourselves. I think it is possible to possess God's kingdom—to be a citizen within that kingdom—but to have grown complacent about the amazing treasure it is. When we don't understand what it is that we have been given, we are less likely to share it with others.

But when we begin to grasp even the edges of the great riches God has given us, something amazing happens in us. First, we begin to experience more of the kingdom in our lives. Second, we grow in our desire to share in word and deed this amazing gift from God with others. And sharing this gift with others can only be done in the power of the Holy Spirit.

Whenever we talk about the power of the Holy Spirit we often focus on the miraculous. These were specific and extraordinary actions that God was taking to confirm the truth of the apostolic message. Miracles happen today too, though not as frequently in our country. There is another expression of power that we can easily ignore. I think it is arguably more important than, and just as amazing as, the miraculous. I refer to the change that takes place inside of us.

We are sent to be Christ's witnesses, and the Holy Spirit gives us the power to carry out our purpose (4:7; 19:11). What sort of power does a witness need in order to be a faithful witness? At a foundational level, I think the power we need is the power to wisely and courageously speak and live-out the truth in love no matter what the context or the circumstances.

Having the power to live generously, even when we have few resources. The power to respond with grace, even when someone maligns or takes advantage of us. The power to act and communicate wisely so that the witness we offer is one that can be received by those we are witnesses to. Wisdom, courage, tact and faithfulness, the power of the Holy Spirit being released in our lives.

Remember what the highest rulers of their day noticed about Peter and John when the two were dragged before the high court to intimidate and question them? “When they [the leaders] saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were *astonished* and they took note that these men had been with Jesus” (4:13).

When you take the time to be with Jesus—when you meditate on His teaching and respond to His Spirit—He changes you from the inside out as the power of His Spirit flows through you to others.

As Christ’s ambassadors we represent God’s kingdom wherever we go. That means that no matter where you are or where you are going, you can expect the Holy Spirit to do things in and through you.ⁱⁱ It might be big and flashy, something seen by all. Or it could be something small and quiet, something seen only by God. No matter what, though, we can expect God will be at work (John 5:17) and be willing to yield to His guiding.

You will receive power. What kind of power do you want? Seriously, take time to explore this question. What kind of power is the power you want to have? Money? Authority? Status in society? Control over your environment? Or we could ask it this way: What kind of power do you currently possess that you don’t want to lose?

The disciples still carried the thought that they would receive political power, but Jesus tells them they will receive something far greater and better—power to be His witnesses.ⁱⁱⁱ The power Jesus offers is greater than any other power you or I could ever desire.

And so I have to ask you the question I had to ask myself earlier in the week: Do I believe the power Jesus offers is better than the one I may want? If not, why not? If not, how do I get to the place where I do believe it is better and more important?

Witnesses will live in a way that reflects the presence of God’s kingdom as they make disciples who obey Jesus’ teaching. And the only way this is possible is by relying on the power that comes from His Holy Spirit.

When Jesus said, you will be my witnesses, the Greek carries both the idea of a task to perform and a relationship to share. Far from being bystanders who saw something and passively testify to what we saw, we are *His* witnesses. We belong to Jesus. We know Him, and He knows us.

Bearing witness to God is not a new idea. In fact, it was supposed to be Israel's role. In Isaiah 43:10 we read:

"But you are my witnesses, O Israel!" says the Lord. "You are my servant. You have been chosen to know me, believe in me, and understand that I alone am God.
There is no other God— there never has been, and there never will be.

Israel did not fulfill this purpose, but Jesus did. Jesus was the perfect Servant of the Lord who faithfully witnessed to His Father and gathered disciples to make them servants of the Lord who faithfully bear witness to God's love and grace in the Christ.

We are sent as Jesus was sent. One thing this means is that we carry His authority in this task. Paul understood what this meant. Isaiah 49:6 is clearly a passage about Jesus as 'The Servant of the Lord.' Even so, in Acts 13:47 Paul applied this passage to himself and Barnabas! He understood what being sent by Jesus meant.

Paul was Jesus' disciple who was sent as Jesus was sent with the authority to do what Jesus did. We are Jesus' disciples who are sent as Jesus was sent with the authority to do what Jesus did.

You will be my witnesses.

The communication tools and tech we have are unprecedented in human history. Even so, the most important tool we have (if we can even call it a tool), remains the same as it was 2,000 years ago. Our witness of the gospel of God's kingdom is best received when it is offered in the context of a loving relationship with someone we know.

Our lives are full of messages that are void of any relationship. From clickbait thumbnails to social media posts to mail in our boxes, we are flooded with information that really does not matter at all. The thing that helps the gospel of God's Kingdom stand out and be noticed within this whirling storm of empty words and distracting images, is when the message is delivered by someone you know who is living a life of love. That's what Jesus did. We are sent as He was sent.

The Book of Acts is a story, the story of how the Holy Spirit empowered people to spread the Kingdom of God into the world, spreading out like ripples on a pond. The interesting thing about this book is that it does not really conclude. Listen to the last two verses.

"For two whole years Paul stayed there in his own rented house and welcomed all who came to see him. ³¹ Boldly and without hindrance he preached the kingdom of God and taught about the Lord Jesus Christ." That's it. Full stop.

One would expect to turn the page and find a 29th chapter, but you don't...at least not in here.

Jesus is continuing His work through the Holy Spirit today. This book will be finished when Jesus returns but until then He is writing the current chapters through you and me and the ripples we create by the witness of our lives.

Prayer

Lord, you made the big splash 2,000 years ago. The resulting ripple has reached us and we want it to spread further still. Help us grasp more of the gift we have received and as we learn more about the wonders of your kingdom, open us to experience more fully the blessing of being in your kingdom. Drop us to our knees in grateful amazement that we might rise to our feet as faithful witnesses and so expand the ripple you began.

Awake our souls to sing about who you are and what you have done. While we don't have more than one tongue to sing your praise, we do have one. Help us to use it well with the people in our own lives and those we meet along the way, until the ripples of your kingdom extends to the very ends of the earth.

ⁱ We are the ones Jesus prayed for in John 17:20, the ones who give their allegiance to Christ because of the apostles' message. We are the ones Jesus had in mind when He told Thomas, "You believe because you have seen. Blessed are those who believe but have not seen" (Jn 20:29). We are the ones living at the ends of the earth who respond to this kingdom ripple, but we are by no means at the end of that ripple's influence.

ⁱⁱ Which includes the power to speak boldly and with wisdom, Acts 4:13, Mt 10:19; Jn 16:13-14

ⁱⁱⁱ The Greek word for witness appears some 167 times in the NT. Mk 13:9. These are people who speak what they have seen and heard, Acts 4:20.